

## Executive Corner

This is a fortnightly column featuring leaders in the executive search industry

### Executive coaches add the extra element

*By Marc-Yannick Ceyton*

#### Some consultancy firms are now offering services which go well beyond search and recruitment



David Hui, partner and director, Whitehead Mann, Hong Kong  
Photo: Lewis Wong

In today's highly competitive business environment, companies are obliged to keep their hiring practices under constant review and to regard the long-term development of human capital as a key part of their corporate investment strategy. As a result, they are taking a more holistic approach to the process of recruitment, assessment and on-the-job coaching for current and future leaders, and this has given rise to a new breed of executive consultant.

Even with the access that international recruitment firms have to databases of qualified candidates suitable for senior positions, "no one ever gets exactly what they want or need", according to David Hui, partner and director at Whitehead Mann, Hong Kong. He explains that the relationship between an executive recruitment firm and its clients is therefore an ongoing one. "We become privy to the clients' long-term objectives and requirements," he says.

One of the most significant facets of this form of partnership is the provision of executive development and coaching programmes. Whitehead Mann designs these in close co-operation with individual clients. The basic intention is not just to identify and hire the best candidates, but also to help new arrivals find their feet more quickly and, subsequently, to maximise their effectiveness.

Moving beyond the more usual "sink or swim" approach still adopted by many firms, the new executive is "onboarded" by following a tailor-made programme put together by consultant and employer. Mr Hui says this way of doing things is vital for the success of both employee and company. "Every time you hire a senior executive it affects the bottom line", he says, adding that the aim of these programmes is to help leaders settle in well and then unlock their full potential in the role.

### Necessary skills

The benefits of such attention to detail are recognised by the top executives involved. There is also an obvious payback for employers in terms of stronger leadership and the development of business skills which fit the specific context. In addition, personal growth continues, meaning that the possibility of an incumbent stagnating or feeling unsupported is avoided. The programme also offers practical assistance in addressing day-to-day problems, facing challenges and improving lines of communication. Independent coaches do this by closely assessing and discussing individual needs and then setting agreed goals within a flexible training programme that can last a few months or be open-ended.

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Much obviously depends on the relationship between the consultant and the client firm. The closer it is, the easier it will be during the recruitment phase to identify candidates who match the job profile and will fit in with the employer's corporate culture. For this reason, the consultant may be asked to handle the interview process, so that it is objective and can be judged against standard benchmarks. "We also use psychometric evaluation when we need a reading of an executive's potential to adapt to significantly more

strategic roles or a different culture," says Mr Hui. "This focuses thinking about how transition into new positions can be managed and provides a head-start for onboarding."

Whitehead Mann offers services specially designed for individuals, teams, boards and whole organisations. Depending on requirements, they can focus on coaching senior executives, those with high potential, people in transition, or for better staff integration. They regularly organise programmes for board effectiveness, executive team development, leadership audit, and coaching for non-executive directors.

### **Integrated plan**

Top recruitment firms can now demonstrate to their clients that a company's success is closely tied to the development of its human capital. This makes it easier to convince them of the importance of an integrated plan for recruitment and subsequent coaching by professionals with experience in all the relevant areas of expertise.

In this way, firms can be helped to overcome weaknesses, amplify strengths and fill in any gaps in the skills or knowledge of senior executives, so that they can manage the working environment and achieve the company's business goals.

Mr Hui notes that some companies have begun to set up their own in-house coaching programmes, but points out that many of these also draw upon external benchmarking to benefit from third-party objectivity. Also, he says it takes a substantial investment of time and effort to implement the kind of integrated structure that consultancy firms can utilise. Their expertise in recruitment, assessment and coaching draws on numerous sources and can be readily adapted to the requirements of a wide range of industries, corporate structures and individuals.

### **Long-term partnership**

Certain recruitment firms now also offer comprehensive services to help clients assess and coach senior executives:

- The process begins with a discussion about strategic challenges and the type of candidate required for specific recruitment projects
- The recruitment conducts an extensive search to identify and match the best candidates
- An objective benchmarking process is used to assess each candidate fairly
- Interviews take place in which abilities, weaknesses and cultural fit are established
- A coaching and development programme is set up to "onboard" the new recruit
- Ongoing coaching focuses on specific areas to enhance personal growth and develop the skills most required in the company and the position

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